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ABSTRACT

For the last several decades the academic discipline of rhetoric and composition has been trying to re-imagine itself, in part in response to the process of professionalization. Unfortunately, the yearning for recognition in a system that does not respect disciplines that are practical or applied has led to some consequences. First, as a consequence of professionalization, the process of specialization has accelerated; further, the various areas of specialization are not equal: those that are more theoretical receive more prestige and respect than those that are applied or practical. Second, as a consequence of professionalization, the discipline now offers more graduate courses for more graduate students, which means more professionals in the field and more professional competition for recognition. Third, more research means fewer classes taught; those taking up the slack are exploited part-time faculty. Finally, as a consequence of professionalization, those who write will increasingly concern themselves with writing and citing others who write (or even themselves), and attention and resources will be directed away from those committed to students and the practical issues involved in teaching them. (TB)

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Alice Calderonello

The Contradictions of Professionalization

In my estimation, for the last several decades the academic discipline of Rhetoric and Composition (or Composition Studies or Rhetoric and Writing)--it is unclear to me exactly what we should call ourselves--has been trying to imagine and re imagine itself, in part in response to the process of professionalization. Professionalization, after all, does suggest that those anointed as "professionals" (whoever they might be) have something valuable and unique to offer, in exchange for which they receive compensation. Within the academy, disciplines seem to claim value for themselves based to a great extent on their ownership of particular knowledge bases and methods for adding to or modifying these. And it goes without saying that it helps to "own" a knowledge base that peers within the academy consider legitimate and intellectually rigorous.

Now for me, these notions of "legitimacy" and "intellectual rigor" have presented us with some interesting challenges because, in part, within the academy disciplines that are perceived as essentially "applied or practical" are not well-respected. Thus, even though, rhetoric/composition (or composition studies) might well point to some *practical* benefits that have accrued to various populations, in part as a consequence of professionalization of the discipline, these benefits haven't contributed much to its prestige or respectability. That is, improved freshman writing instruction, writing across the curriculum programs, the adoption of peer evaluation, portfolio assessment, the teaching of invention and revision, and other similar pedagogies within many elementary, middle, and secondary classrooms may have earned us growth in undergraduate and graduate enrollment and, thus, increased resources and staff, including tenure-line

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positions. But these increases in staff and resources are often grudgingly accorded--often accompanied by muttered references to "crass market forces" or "filthy lucre" amongst our brethren and sistern in literary studies.

And are we sensitive to these slings and arrows? Do we yearn for respectability despite our service to countless students, our growth in visibility, and even our recognition as a G-E-N-U-I-N-E discipline--at least by some? I'd say so. And I believe it is, in part, these yearnings that help contribute to some of the more negative consequences of professionalization that I (and others) have observed. What are some of these? I have here a list of a few items, by no means meant to be exhaustive or comprehensive, merely suggestive:

•First, I believe that, in part, as a consequence of professionalization, the process of specialization has accelerated, and the resulting specializations--which may be based upon areas of inquiry, professional interest, methodological approach and (perhaps most important) the nature of the work one performs--do not enjoy equal status within the profession. In particular, those specializations that are perceived to be the most pedagogical, the most student-oriented (and "therefore" the least theoretical) enjoy the lowest status. I also think that this process of specialization and the resulting stratification of specialties is contributing to--as well as being influenced by--the continued devaluing of teaching. [I am not alone in observing that the teaching has lost ground. Jane Peterson lamented that we considered "teaching far less important than research or scholarship" (notice her opposition of the two) in her 1990 Chair's Address to 4C's; Thomas Huckin, who made a study of 4C's proposals between 1981 and 1988 found that in 1988 theoretical proposals were more likely to be selected to appear on the conference program than those that emphasized pedagogy; he also reported

that "the bias...observed...against pedagogy-oriented proposals [was] not a one-time aberration but is part of a general trend" (which he found noticeable from 1983 on). And Margaret Baker Graham and Patricia Goubil-Gambrell in the most recent issue of JAC (Winter 1995) argue that "...the new game in the late 80's and early 90's has been one of elitism and individualism--and not pedagogy." They further report that the trend within College English, a major journal witin English and Composition Studies, has been to decrease the number of articles published that "explicitly address[ ] pedagogy." (p. 113)

•Another consequence of professonalization, in my estimation, has been the establishment of courses and programs--especially at the graduate level--in Composition Studies. These course/programs, ostensibly created in response to a "legitimate" need, none-the-less exist also to provide "suitable" work for the increasing number of Ph.D. specialists. However, more specialists also means increased competition and therefore more pressure to engage in research/scholarship to secure employment, attain job security, and/or advance professionally. The process of professionalization, then, has intensified the pressure among Composition Specialists to publish and has moved them to establish an increasing number of graduate programs.

Now, an increase in research output and graduate programs for our discipline may be laudatory but it can impose a heavy price: At my university, a former Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences informed me that the huge, *noticeable* jump in part-time employment within the college was due to a college-wide drop of 2 hours in the average teaching load of tenured and tenure-track faculty--this as a direct consequence of the university's increased emphasis on research and graduate education. Who, then was hired to make up the 2-hour loss? Part time faculty. [I would add that some part time faculty, reports Frances Ruhlen McConnel, teach from seven to sixteen

courses per year, sometimes at several different institutions, for salaries that range from the mid-teens to the low-to-mid twenties, and often with no fringe benefits. (This from "Freeway Flyers: The Migrant Workers of the Academy" in Writing Ourselves in to the Story: Unheard Voices from Composition Studies by Sheryl Fontaine and Susan Hunter (SIU Press, 1993)]

•Finally, professionalization has surely affected who gets counted as "knowledge makers"--and, of course, what gets counted as knowledge. As teaching and pedagogy are increasingly devalued, those who devote their time principally to instruction will (to quote Margaret Baker Graham and Patricia Goubil-Gambrell, JAC Winter 1995 be "silenced by being denied...tenured position[s] or...[be] ignored as...invisible temporar[ies] who teach[ ] too many students at too low a salary so that scholars are free to write" (p. 115) The number and diversity of those who get heard will continue to dwindle as the same writers are cited again and again--even by themselves! [I invite you to take a look at the longitudinal study of CCC (CCC, December 1993) conducted by Donna Burns Phillips, Ruth Greenburg, and Sharon Gibson.] And the subordinate position of those who principally concern themselves with students and with teaching will insure that student needs will decreasingly be considered legitimate topics for serious study and, thus, various student populations will be neglected. Russel Durst, for example, (CCC, December 1990) reported that in his analysis of composition research between 1984 and 1989 "only five percent of studies focused on minority writers." (p. 404). I am not surprised. Because of lack of interest regarding this population--at least as evidenced within the professional literature throughout the 70's and 80's--Min-zhan Lu had to help us rediscover (in 1991) that functional bidialectalism isn't an entirely rosy prospect. And the excellent pieces on African American discourse that are currently being

published by Kermit Campell, Arnetha Ball, and Valerie Balester have had to rely on the work of William Labov, Thomas Kochman, and Roger Abrahams --work that was performed fifteen, even twenty years ago--because so little else has been done since.

Professionalization, then, has been a mixed blessing; it is a process that embodies contradictions. Today, I hope that we might continue the project of reimagining--and thus reconfiguring--the structures that define us and the that work we do.